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ABSTRACT

To show how Hugh Blair's treatise on rhetoric helped shape the patriarchal context in which women write and to suggest some considerations for modern teachers of writing, it will be useful to look at the ways 18th-century belletristic rhetoric responded to the disruption occasioned by women's entry into public discourse. Blair's work, the most popular statement of the new rhetoric, synthesized the ideas of his contemporaries and was a favorite textbook of young ladies in female academies. His rhetoric is belletristic rhetoric because it takes criticism as well as oratory as its subject. Women in Blair's time, and subsequent times, have had to deal with the masculinist standards set in place by belletristic critical theory and the patriarchal culture to which it spoke. Blair's theory of language is no less oppressive than his imperialistic attitudes toward discourse. However, Blair or his contemporaries cannot be faulted for their presumptions about discourse or language when the epistemology of their age is considered. Modern teachers of writing have the opportunity to acknowledge the multiplicity of discourse and to valorize private forms of discourse, neglected since Blair's time. This would help heal a long-established false dichotomy and liberate both the oppressor and the oppressed from the prison of authoritarian patriarchal discourse. (Twelve notes are included, and 25 references are appended.) (MS)

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Abstract

Hugh Blair and the Female Pen

This paper looks at the ways belletristic rhetoric responded to the disposition of university educated males who dominated eighteenth-century males who dominated English society by reaffirming a patriarchal context for public discourse, discusses the implications of belletristic rhetoric for women writers, and suggests considerations for modern teachers of writing. It argues that belletristic rhetorics, as represented by Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres, reinforced the dichotomy between masculine and feminine discourse forms. Masculine discourse, which evolved from the agonistic training males received at universities, was privileged over feminine discourse, which reflected women's "practical" education and socialization. By so doing, Blair and his contemporaries assured the marginalization of women's discourse by devaluing women's written forms, setting in place masculine prescriptions about style, fostering the creation of an androcentric canon, and positing a mechanistic view of language. The paper concludes by acknowledging the potential of modern composition theory to heal this false dichotomy through its revalorization of private discourse: prewriting, drafting, freewriting, journal-keeping, double-entry notebooks, learning logs, exploratory and autobiographical essays.

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Hugh Blair and the Female Pen

Women became a literary presence in England in the eighteenth-century, the period when all of Europe was becoming predominately literate. Like other non-classsically trained, non-university trained members of English society, women began buying and writing books, and doing so in great numbers. The new social arrangement of women working at home and the greater leisure afforded them by the rise of the middle-class contributed to the rise of of female literary activity. By 1788, Horace Walpole complained, "We have hen-novelists and poetesses in every parish" (Quoted by Halsband 706).

This flurry of female literary actitity did not go unnoticed or unremarked upon by the dominant male culture. Susan Gubar has argued that eighteenth-century writers, like Swift and Pope, used monstrous women, dark goddesses, and female dunces to express their fear of cultural disintegration ("Augustan Satire" 380). Though relatively ignored by contemporary scholarship, the rhetorics of the eighteenth-century were extremely important to the development of literary studies and critical theory, and strongly influenced nineteenth- and twentieth-century educational practices. Their influence on the women writers throughout this period should not be underestimated. In this paper I will look at the ways belletristic rhetoric responded to the disruption occasioned by women's entry into public

discourse by considering the rhetoric of Hugh Blair. My purpose is both to show how his rhetoric helped shape the patriarchal context in which women write and to suggest some considerations for modern teachers of writing.

On first thought, we don't expect rhetorics of the period to mention women. After all, their classical models didn't. Classical rhetorics ignored women because in the classical period they were excluded, for the most part, from public life. Not so in the eighteenth-century, despite educational and economic disadvantages, women from every level of society were producing writing of all kinds: polemical tracts, translations, poetry, plays, novels, travel books, letters, diaries, journals, and how-to-books on midwifery, childcare, and cooking.[1] Interestingly, departures from classical rhetoric made by late eighteenth-century rhetorics responded to other new developments in human society: they acknowledged the growing importance of the written word by extending the domain of rhetoric to include written forms, they acknowledged the emergence of science as the primary source of knowledge by dismissing the commonplaces of classical invention, they acknowledged the emergence of psychology by incorporating ideas from associative psychology, and they reflected ideas from common-sense philosophy, empiricism, sensationalism, phenomenalism, and skepticism.[2] Why didn't they also reflect the emergence of women into public discourse? The omission was not, I believe, ideologically innocent.

I have chosen to focus my discussion on Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres for several reasons: 1) it synthesized the ideas of his contemporaries in a lucid textbook at the end of the century; 2) it was the most popular statement of the new rhetoric, going through "sixty-two complete editions and fifty-one abridgements" (Golden et al 112); 3) it "markedly influenced writers and speakers, teachers and students in Great Britain and in America" (Harding vii); and 4) most important, it was said to be a favorite textbook of young ladies in female academies (Ehninger and Golden 18). According to Winifred B. Horner, Blair "turned the compass of rhetoric in new directions; more than any other name, his is associated with those new directions" (Present State of Scholarship 123).

Blair and the Belletristic Tradition

Blair's rhetoric is a belletristic rhetoric because it takes criticism as well as oratory as its subject. In keeping with the agonistic training boys received in public schools and at universities, it stresses oratory, to which it devotes ten chapters, and then moves on to discuss written forms. It takes up written forms traditionally associated with males and public life, those to which women traditionally had limited access: poetic, historical, dramatic, philosophical, legal, deliberative, scientific, and ceremonial--forms associated with the assertive masculine mode. Like other

belletristic rhetorics, Blair's affirms the dichotomy between masculine and feminine discourse as a means of curtailing women's entry in public discourse.

The rhetorical style of academically educated males in the eighteenth-century, in keeping with agonistic traditions, required that they distance themselves from their subject, assume an adversarial stance, and handle arguments through analytical division regardless of the form in which they wrote,[3] while women, for the most part, used an alternate rhetoric. According to Patricia A. Sullivan, the training of respectable ladies after the seventeenth-century was extremely practical, focused on giving them instruction in "reading for cultural improvement, writing letters, and diaries," and by consequence, women's rhetorical style tended to "heighten emotional involvement with the subject, use massive detail for realistic effect, and create a temporal and episodic sequence through narrative" (142).[4] Blair's rhetoric sets in place prescriptions that privilege not only masculine forms but also masculine rhetorical style.

Blair speaks of good style as "manly" (I:407). By this he clearly means in accord with agonistic tradition: he defines a good style as one which "frees us from searching for . . . meaning" (II:186), strikes us with its "simplicity and unaffectedness" (II:398) and lays stress on "matter" rather than on "friviously rich" ornamentation (II:407). These prescriptions are obviously at odds with feminine rhetoric in the period. While women sought to heighten

emotional effects, Blair priviliges a simple style that "stands opposed to too much ornament or pomp of language" (I:389). While women tended to rely on massive detail, Blair warns against the excesses to which a "diffuse" style may lead, and says that "a diffuse manner generally weakens" sense (I:373). While temporal, episodic presentation of ideas was used by women, Blair stresses that writers should "commonly begin with some introduction, in order to prepare the minds of hearers; . . . state /their/ subject, . . . explain the facts connected with it; . . . employ arguments for establishing /their/ opinion and overthrowing that of /their/ opponents; /and/ if there be room for it, endeavour to touch the passions of /their/ audience" (II:156-7). Manly style, derived from agonistic training, is thus characterized as the reverse of feminine writing, so that feminine writing becomes a negative standard against which to measure successful male discourse.

Blair's remarks on taste further serve to strengthen the dichotomy between masculine and feminine discourse. All of his models are drawn from classical and contemporary, university-educated male sources, and he is fond of quoting illustrative passages in Latin from favorite classical scholars, to demonstrate that taste is an attribute of classically trained, university-educated males: he asks,

> . . . is there anyone who will seriously maintain that the taste of a Hottentot or a Laplander is as delicate as that of a Longinus or an Addison (I:27)?

Though Blair probably did not consider women in his society savages,[5] like his contemporaries, he thought most of them incapable of the studies required to attain taste.[6] Women, afterall, were praised for being sympathetic and not encouraged to cultivate their intellects.

Blair's emphasis on the study of culturally sanctioned models accords with the the social ideal of the liberally educated male. Reading the classics, he suggests, not only trains men to taste but also inculcates an appreciation for what has been universally valued in contrast to transitory pleasures (I:31). Classical models are worthy of study precisely because they transcend the times and places where they were conceived (I:35). Of the eternal verity of this tradition, he writes

> If any one, at this day, in the eighteenth century, takes upon him to decry the ancient classics, . . . we may boldly tell such a man, that reputation of such writers is established upon a foundation too solid, to be now shaken by any arguments whatever; for it is established upon the almost universal taste of mankind, proved and tried throughout the succession of the ages (II:249-50).

Presumably, writing that was not grounded in this androcentric canon could not reveal universal truths.

Blair's theory of language is both materialistic and imperialistic, and related as well to his notion universality. He dismisses the rhetor's personal invention, his use of the commonplaces of classical rhetoric, because his view of language and knowledge is empirically based: he leaves it to "knowledge and science /to/ furnish the materials" (I:4) for composition because he sees the mind as

a passive organ that takes in sensory impressions and organizes them into ideas, signified by words. It is imperialistic because, according to Blair, language is a vehicle for describing reality, not for constructing it. Speaking of the "wonderful power of language," Blair eulogizes in the ways language "sets mirrors before us, where we may behold objects, a second time, in their likeness" (I:289), "likeness" meaning presumably congruence between with socially sanctioned constructs. When personal reality diverges from public reality, it is the former not the latter that is to be mistrusted.

Implications for Women

Women in Blair's time, and subsequent times, have had to deal with the masculinist standards set in place by belletristic critical theory and the patriarchal culture to which it spoke. If it were not for the fact that women, in order to gain male approval and thereby a hearing, internalized these standards and appropriated patriarchal values, it would be easy to treat belletristic rhetoric as part of a plot by the dominant male culture against women--and to act as if women were innocent victims. After all, belletristic rhetoric did help assure the marginalization of women's discourse by devaluing women's forms, setting in place masculinist prescriptions about style, fostering the creation of an androcentric canon, and positing a mechanistic

view of language. Women, however, as well as men have followed its dictums and helped affirm the patriarchal context for writing.

Much that has been written in the past about the forms and styles used by women accords with Blair's treatment, or rather dismissal, of them. Forms used by women have been treated as marginal and their stylistic choices seen as inferior.[7] Discussions have more often reflected presuppositions about the ways women write than accurately described what they do. In keeping with the the agonistic tradition, masculine writing has been described as terse, logical, strong, objective, and persuasive, while feminine writing has been presumed to be verbose, over-complicated, diffuse, timid, emotional, and tentative. And scant attention has been given to the nature of feminine rhetoric.

As the primary institution for dismissing the forms and styles used by women, the androcentric literary canon, foreshadowed by Blair's androcentric models, has come under heavy attack by feminists. But it still exists, and prior to the emergence of twentieth-century feminist literary theory, women writers struggled to work within its system of values. When women writers attempted to conform to its standards, they ran the risk of failing and slipping into oblivion or of winning favor at a heavy price. That price, according to Susan Hardy Aiken, was being read "as if they were men"--unsexed, "as if their sexual difference were little more than historical accident" (295). George Eliot, for example, paid

the price.[8] Works that defied masculinist standards were, for the most part, subject to excision from literary history by critics who saw them either as unintelligible or threatening from a male perspective. Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Women and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Aurora Leigh" were dropped from critical study for this reason.[9] And, works that appeared to conform to masculinist values for subversive purposes, might win male approval at the time of their publication but are today under feminist attack for "making too much use of the oppressor's language" (Spender 204). Virginia Woolf, for example, is criticized as someone too eager to assuage male critics, even when her project was to subvert masculinist values. [10]

Blair's theory of language is no less oppressive than his imperialistic attitudes toward discourse. Women, like men, are socialized into preconceptions about the nature of men and women--and about the natures of masculine and feminine discourse, and Blair's theory of language presumes that users of a language cannot escape public reality, the symbols and definitions of shared language conventions. It legislates against private versions of reality--such as the sense that women can write--and thus serves to oppress women as much as other patriarchal institutions. And women accepted this view of language because they were victimized by the idea that language merely reflects social relations. While they believed this to be the case, they had little basis for pitting their private sense of self against

patriarchal notions about the nature of women and women's discourse.

Considerations for Modern Teachers of Writing

As modern teachers, we cannot fault Hugh Blair or his contemporaries for their presumptions about discourse or language when we consider the epistemology of their age. For eighteenth-century thinkers knowledge consisted of a growing pile of truths grounded in humanistic traditions. Certain forms and styles were valuable because they were part of humanistic traditions. Texts which had a clear relation to humanistic traditions were authorized, and texts that did not were suspect. Language was a vehicle for mirroring truths about the world and reality, not for constructing it. Thus, liberal humanism functioned as a legitimizing ideology in the control of the patriarchy.

For eighteenth-century thinkers, the natures of males and females as well as masculine and feminine discourse were determined, not social constructs imposed by cultural and social norms. It was natural for men to be more rational than women, and not simply a consequence of the kinds of training men had been given since classical times. The "inadequacies" of feminine discourse were natural and not a consequence of the practical educations they received. If females had not participated in public discourse in the classical period, it was because it would have been unnatural

for them to have done so. Considering the relentless patriarchal indoctrination that surrounded women from the moment they were born, it is remarkable that they wrote at all in the eighteenth-century.

All of this may seem too remote to be significant to us today as teachers of writing, but we have only to ask ourselves if agonistic discourse forms are still given hegemony over others and whether certain texts are still privileged because of their relation to a received tradition? As teachers we recognize that discourse forms (the thesis-driven essay or argument), consistent with agonistic pedagogy, are still more often required to measure academic achievement than more personal forms such as the autobiographical or the exploratory essay. And, the battle still rages over the literary canon in our graduate seminars. What is more, we see evidence of the hegemony given to agonistic rhetoric in the general culture as well. The language of our technological society is abstract, impersonal, and inexpressive, meant to win authority and control by masking its biases.[11]

Modern teachers of writing have the opportunity to acknowledge the multiplicity of discourse and to valorize private forms of discourse, neglected since Blair's time. It is right that we ask ourselves and our students repeatedly what constitutes good writing, why some forms of writing are supposedly more valuable to us as learners and knowers than others, and which is more useful to master, the objective,

impersonal voice or the subjective, personal voice, or if one is necessarily more useful than the other. It is right that we ask ourselves if we believe that the only measure of subject-mastery is the thesis-driven essay, if we hold stereotypical notions about the effacacy of masculine and feminine discourse, and whether, at least part of the time, we ask students to write in ways congenial to the patterns of feminine interaction, to the ways females are socialized to use discourse.[12] And right that we ask students to challenge social definitions and conventional assumptions about how men and women use language.

Modern composition theory has done much to valorize private discourse forms by championing prewriting, drafting, freewriting, journal-keeping, double-entry notebooks, learning logs, and exploratory essays, and writing-across-the-curriculum holds the promise of introducing these forms to disciplines outside of English. As teachers of writing, we have the opportunity to reverse the false split between public and private, masculine and feminine discourse and become a positive forces for social change and improvement. Virginia Woolf commented on the lack of true pictures of women's lives, owing to the privatization of their experience in A Room of One's Own:

> It /is/ strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that; and how little can a man know even of that when he observes it through the black or rosy spectacles which sex puts upon his nose (86).

By asking our students to write expressively and subjectively as often as we ask them to write in objective, impersonal modes, we will be bringing women's narratives to light.

In "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love," Jim W. Corder writes that "each of use creates the narrative that he or she is" and "each of us is an argument," but not the kind of argument we have been taught to think of as argument. He says the kind he has in mind is "not something we make outside ourselves" but rather the "argument /is/ what we are," composed of "all the choices we've made, accidentally or on purpose, in creating our histories/narratives" (18). Until this century, women's arguments have been muted in public discourse because critics have excluded, distorted, and excised them. Women's arguments have been what Corder calls "contending narratives," narratives that "entail a genuine threat to /their audiences'/ identity" (19).

Corder suggests the only way to deal with contending narratives is through love: "we have to see each other, to know each other, to be present to each other, to embrace each other" (23). For men and women to embrace one another's discourse in the context of the patriarchy would require the dethroning male discourse from its authoritative position. Opening oneself to love necessitates relinquishment of authority. Any "authoritative position," as Corder sees it "is a prison" (29). Such an undertaking, of course, will involve a restructuring of cultural models. Literary critics who challenge the canon and question criteria for valuing and

selecting literary works are engaged in this enterprise, and writing teachers as well have an important role to play--by studying female discourse and by inviting students to write in forms associated with private discourse. As they encourage male and female students alike to experiment with journals, personal narratives, autobiographies, exploratory essays, they will be helping to bring women's experience into the open. By so doing they will be not only be healing a long-established false dichotomy but also liberating the oppressor and the oppressed from the prison of authoritarian patriarchal discourse.

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1 For a discussion of the literary milieu of women, see Moira Ferguson's First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578-1799; Dale Spender's Women of Ideas (and What Men Have Done to Them); Judith Lowder Newton's Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778-1800; and Katherine M. Rogers, Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England.

2 For general discussions of eighteenth-century rhetoric, see Wilbur Samuel Howell's Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric and Edward P.J. Corbett and James Golden's introduction to The Rhetoric of Blair, Campbell, and Whately.

3 See Walter J. Ong's Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture 17-38.

4 Blair even fails mention the novel, a recent male literary invention, of which 2,000 were produced by women between 1760 and 1800, perhaps because, according to Halsband, women wrote most of the fiction published in the eighteenth-century. The form became so much a woman's form that in the latter-half of the century many male authors attributed their novels to women in the hope that they would sell better.

5 It is worth noting that according to Carole Pateman ("The Disorder of Women: Women, Love, and the Sense of Justice": 20-35) one prominent eighteenth-century thinker, Jean Jacques Rousseau, did represent women as barbarians, a "disorder" in need of regulation.

6 In the eighteenth-century women were praised as being more guided by sympathy than by reason. Some eighteenth-century

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writers, including Mary Astell, Daniel Defoe, Catherine Macauley, Erasmus Darwin, and Mary Wollstonecraft, advocated the education of women, but the prevailing view held that only the rare woman possessed a "manly" intellect (Ferguson 16-27). Many eighteenth-century males, believing that women's role in society was to morally uplift the nation through the exercise of their natural sympathies within the family, allowed, like philosopher David Hume, that if women cultivated their reasons their capacity for sympathy would diminish (Rendall 13).

7 Robin Lakoff's Language And A Woman's Place (1975) is a seminal work in feminist linguistics that made the question of gender-based language differences a legitimate area of research. It, however, reflects biases of the time of its publication against women's language, which posited male discourse as normative. Lakoff discovered the "deficiency" of women's language: "The ultimate effect of these discrepencies /between male and female discourse/ is that women are systematically denied access to power, on the grounds that they are not capable of holding it as demonstrated by their linguistic behavior along with other aspects of their behavior. . ." (7).

8 In "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," George Eliot shows what happens to women when they fail in attempts to conform: they look silly. She satirizes lady novelists for their propensity for "pedantic twaddle" and their eagerness to make "Greek and Hebrew" as well as "'dear old Virgil,' 'the graceful Horace,' 'the humane Cicero' and 'the pleasant Livy'" seem "mere play to heroine/s/" (305). Ironically, Eliot herself could write like a man and so won favor, but the price for her fame was concealment of her female identity (Marian Evans) behind a masculine pseudonym.

9 The excision of A Vindication of the Rights of Women and of "Aurora Leigh" provide two examples. Despite praise for Mary Wollstonecraft as a feminist theorist, most critics thought her Vindication poorly written, but recently, feminist critic Elissa S. Guralnick has suggested that Wollstonecraft's rhetoric is not so much a failed rhetoric as an alternate rhetoric (174). And, feminist critic Cora Kaplan has charged that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem "Aurora Leigh" dropped from literary memory primarily because it challenged the myth that women cannot write epic poetry, not because it was a bad epic poem (10).

10 Though much revered and frequently invoked by feminists, Virginia Woolf has come under frequent attack because of the way "Woolf," as Dale Spender puts it, "defers to male power" (204)

11 David N. Dobrin, discussing the impersonal, objective voice

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employed by technical writers, explains that the formal objectivity of much technical writing is a linguistic device used to "disguise mediation" as a means "of coopting the authority of science" ("What's Technical About Technical Writing" 232).

12 In Women's Talk in the Ivory Tower, Paula A. Treichler and Cheris Kramarae report on research which seems to indicate that the agonistic stance required by the thesis-driven expository or argumentative essay is more consistent with the socialization of males than females.

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